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SUBJECT: Comoran Dialogue Depends on Sambi's Leadership

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ANTAN 591

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: The Ambassador called on President Sambi to take leadership and reach out to the opposition to make progress toward the pending "Inter-Comoran Dialogue". In bilateral discussions and in joint meetings with international community colleagues, the Ambassador encouraged Union and "opposition" members to improve their communication, which in turn might foster economic progress. Sambi reiterated his private promise to step down in 2010 and that the Mohelian "turn" as president will be respected. Getting him to say so publicly might provide the key to the heretofore elusive solution to their institutional problems. This week's bilateral meeting with the Comorans will be another opportunity to stress the importance of their resolving these issues. END SUMMARY.

Ambassador Asks Sambi to Lead

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¶2. (SBU) The Ambassador encouraged President Sambi to take leadership of the stumbling process toward an Inter-Comoran Dialogue. Meeting September 11 in Moroni, the Ambassador suggested Sambi make a public statement that he would not extend his mandate beyond 2010, allow Moheli its turn next in the rotation, and preserve island autonomy (all things the President has assured us in private). President Sambi took on board the Ambassador's points, while again complaining at length that the constitution was unworkable and he had insufficient power to govern the Comoros. The Ambassador told Sambi the "opposition" could continue to use their fears as a pretext to avoiding talks, until the President offered his solemn assurances.

¶3. (SBU) While open to the Ambassador's guidance and insisting he preferred dialogue to a referendum, President Sambi referred to obscure previous times (one in France) when (in vague terms) he had made the guarantees the opposition wanted. The Ambassador assured Sambi his messages to date have been inadequate or too ambiguous, that more presidential leadership is needed to create the conditions for a true dialogue, and suggested the President use the solemn occasion of his Eid address to the nation to specifically reassure Comorans of his intentions.

Union Ministers On "Process"

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¶4. (SBU) In separate meetings with the Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Justice, and Institutional Reform, the Ambassador called on his interlocutors to push President Sambi to lead. The GOC officials spoke from the same script, insisting the constitution was unworkable. They blamed in particular Grande Comore Island President Abdouwahab and the National Assembly for obstructing effective governance. Foreign Minister Jaffar, who will lead the Comoran delegation for bilateral discussions in Washington this week, cleared shared the ambassador's view that more presidential leadership is needed; Jaffar encouraged the ambassador to deliver a clear message to that effect to the president in their meeting the next day, and implied he would do the same.

"Opposition" Remains Distrustful

¶15. (SBU) In meetings with Grande Comore's Island President and the National Assembly President (the cornerstones of the opposition coalition, the latter a Mohelian), the Ambassador allowed them to voice concerns while pushing for improved communication with the Union. They remain intransigent, seeking written guarantees from the African Union before they will agree to talks with the Union. They insisted (again) the constitution "must not be touched" during the dialogue, reiterating that Comoros' governance problems are rooted in the Sambi government's incompetence and failure to implement legislation related to federal responsibilities. Nonetheless, the ambassador encouraged them to be open to signals and new communication from the president, especially those reassuring them on their main concerns (that Sambi will leave in 2010, when Moheli will get its turn, and that island autonomy will be preserved). The National Assembly president expressed openness to any such signals.

¶16. (SBU) In a new wrinkle, G-C President Abdouwahab said the "Technical Committee" was unacceptable and that leaders themselves must sit down first to establish principles. He blamed Sambi for not having convened such a meeting, despite multiple suggestions that he do so. (NOTE: African Union S/E Madeira has been pushing for technical talks, hoping to be less threatening in order to build a little confidence. END NOTE). Abdouwahab's argument, in part based on his legal background as a magistrate and in part in his search for any excuse to avoid talks, included renewed demands for written assurances before he would agree to any talks with the Union government. Abdouwahab did not exclude revising the constitution if the assembled parties deemed it necessary to do so, but rejected any

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Union initiative intended expressly to revise the constitution (which he has good reason to suspect). He also chafed at what he perceives as an excessive foreign (read AU) role in conducting a dialogue "that is supposed to be between Comorans". Responding to an AU press conference held on September 11 at which Madeira offered assurances that Sambi will leave in 2010 and that Moheli's turn is assured, Abdouwahab complained, "Sambi knows how to speak. He does not need the AU to do that for him."

S/E Madeira's Final Push

¶17. (SBU) While in Moroni, the Ambassador also participated with African Union Special Envoy Madeira and the international community in ongoing talks with the GOC (REFTELS). The group again advised FM Jaffar that the Comorans must take ownership over the dialogue process; the AU cannot and will not do it for them. Before departing September 11 (he is unlikely to return until the Comorans demonstrate their will to talk by taking basic steps in the Technical Preparatory Committee), S/E Madeira made a public statement in which he called on President Sambi to lead, in addition to the assurances noted above.

¶18. (SBU) The tiny Moroni international community remains closely aligned, insisting on Comoran ownership and offering facilitation. South Africa (following a fall-out over Mbeki's opposition to the Anjouan liberation in March) is again openly supportive of the AU initiative; the French are supportive, but only quietly so, for fear of being blamed for any future breakdown. A senior Tanzanian delegation was also in town, looking at opening a diplomatic mission in Moroni, but curiously was not part of any talks with the AU.) Members noted the Union and opposition remain as far apart as they were one month ago, despite many meetings and the basic framework the AU has established. S/E Madeira declined to provide his own guarantees to the opposition, insisting again, "You must sit down with your brothers and decide what you must talk about." In his communications with the Island Presidents of Grande Comore and Moheli, and the National Assembly, S/E Madeira emphasized the Technical Preparatory Committee must simply establish a budget and timeline so at least international partners can offer support (NOTE: When this process does start, the AU, UN and perhaps others will foot most of the bills for inter-island flights, hotels, and per

diem. END NOTE).

COMMENT:

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¶9. (SBU) Mistrust continues to prevail in the Comoros. If President Sambi takes our advice to make specific public assurances, in his Eid address or elsewhere, the opposition's best excuses for delay may be neutralized. The threat of a referendum, which the President has not/not made public but which is well known to opposition leaders, may also serve as motivation to bring them to the table - although some clearly doubt Sambi's ability, having lost almost all of his post-liberation popularity, to muster the majority required for a constitutional referendum to pass. The mutual recriminations made indirectly by both sides, via international diplomats as conduits, demonstrate Comoran politicians' continuing focus on self-interest (mainly the preservation of powers, prestige, perks, and salaries under the current system) and inability to seek compromise. Nonetheless, Sambi's explicit (if not yet public) commitment to leave office in 2010 (coming less than two months after Secretary Rice privately suggested he do so) is an important development perhaps providing the key that eventually will unlock a solution. END COMMENT.

MARQUARDT